DECISION

February 16, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil."
--Luke 4:1-2a (RSV)

Scripture
Luke 4:1-13

"This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not be false to any man."
--Hamlet, Act 1, Sc. 3, Line 75

That's from Hamlet. It is about integrity which is also what the text is about today.

The Time Magazine cover article this week was Gospel TV - Religion, Politics and Money. It was a fascinating and helpful survey of the enormous enterprise media religion has become. Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans don't quite know what to make of it. Clearly we are not a part of it and in that situation it is difficult not to be guilty of envy. After all, Jimmy Swaggart takes in $140 million dollars a year which is roughly three times the amount of money the entire Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) spends on mission, and compared to which even the largest Presbyterian churches are very small potatoes. Everyone of us who read the article cringed, I am sure, to read the assessment that the independent evanglicals have achieved a virtual monopoly in the media because "mainline religion violated the first commandment of TV: Thou shalt not bore." Almost makes you want to go out and do something outlandish. The article concluded, however, by citing a critic of the new television religion, Malcom Muggeridge. Muggeridge is a former BBC Commentator, Editor of Punch, witty, man of letters, and now outspoken and irritating but eloquent Christian. Muggeridge was invited to a colloquium on the topic in 1977 at the University of Edinburgh. His lectures are published in a little book, Christ and the Media.

In the opening lecture, Muggeridge "spins a fantasy in which Jesus, having survived the three temptations in the wilderness, is offered a fourth; a contract from Lucifer, Inc. to go to Rome and anchor a First Century network variety show."

Listen to Muggeridge tell about the Fourth Temptation of Christ. The media would have regarded Jesus as just another crackpot... "Had I been a

journalist then, I should, I am sure, have spent my time hanging about Herod's Palace, following the comings and goings of Pilate, trying to find out what was afoot in the Sanhedrin: the cameras would have been set up in Caesarea, not Galilee, still less on Golgotha."

Muggeridge has a Roman tycoon named Gladus discover Jesus and decide that the message is so good that everyone should hear it, and the best way to do that is to make Jesus a star. So he arranges for Jesus to be "puffed," made more marketable for prime time.

The location is Rome, of course, not Galilee. "For the set they'd have fountains playing, a lush atmosphere, with organ music, a good chorus-line, if possible from Delphi, and some big names from the games - gladiators in full rig; also, if possible, priests and priestesses from The Aphrodite Temple.

"Would Jesus agree? Gladus laughs at the mere notion of a refusal. How could he possibly refuse what would enable him to reach a huge public, right across the Roman Empire, instead of the rag, tag and bobtail lot following him around Galilee?

"Why," Gladus says... "it'll put him on the map... He'd be crazy to turn it down."

Muggeridge concludes: "Jesus, who in Gladus' terms, was crazy, did turn it down all the same, as he had with the other three temptations. He was concerned with truth and reality; Gladus with fantasy and images." [Christ and the Media, p. 38-41]

The season of Lent for centuries has been a time of intentional introspection for followers of Jesus. It has been the time in the rhythm of the year when Christian men and women look carefully and honestly at their interior selves. It has been a time of repentence and confession; not morbidly so, because there is forgiveness and acceptance. It is for our spiritual health, and the way the Christian Church has observed Lent for centuries, is by remembering and rehearing Jesus' own pilgrimage to the cross; the story of his passion. Throughout the world today, Christians who want to affirm that long tradition, are starting at the same place: by hearing the Gospel story which relates the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. It is about integrity and the strength to be true to oneself.

After his baptism in the Jordan River by his cousin John, Jesus spent a period of time alone, in the wilderness. I like to think that he told this story to his disciples one evening when they were together talking about how to proceed, what to do next, whether or not, for instance, to join up with the Zealots who were planning to seize political power and drive the Romans into the sea. It enhances this story for me to remember that Jesus told it to his followers for a purpose.

The wilderness was, first of all, a place: a stretch of land fifteen by thirty five miles, south of Jerusalem, extending to the Dead Sea. I am told that it is hard to imagine a more barren, bleak and isolated place.

It was not the kind of place to which one ordinarily goes simply to be alone for a few days.

The reason Jesus went to that wilderness, I think, was similar to the reasons why people climb mountains alone, and sail across the ocean in small boats, or even run marathons. Ther is a singularity and simplicity and purity to it that requires a person to be authentically whatever he or she is. It requires a person to decide to be - without the support of all the accouterments of modern life. It puts a person by necessity, in dialogue with the most elemental world there is, and one learns in that - who one is. So Jesus, in the wilderness, is with himself, confronting the life ahead of him. The word "temptation," used to describe this experience, is misleading. He was not struggling with the clear moral choice between good and evil. "Tests" is a better word - and the tester, the one proposing three possible scenarios for Jesus' life is none other than Satan.

Now Satan is a very useful figure. In fact sometimes Satan has been a convenient methodology for avoiding responsibility for evil in the world. Here, however, is a Satan who is sharp, articulate, witty. Instead of the figure in traditional mythology, standing in the door of a Rush Street dive, luring innocent people into all sorts of lustful and excessive activity, this one has a business suit on, has an M.B.A., is talking good sense, quoting scripture no less and simply suggesting a reasonable compromise or two.

It's a masterful performance. The first ploy is the powerful psychological dynamic of self-doubt. "If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread." In Jesus Christ Superstar, Herod simply asks Jesus to prove his divinity. What could be more reasonable?

"Prove to me that you're divine - change my water into wine" he sings...

"Prove to me that you're no fool - walk across my swimming pool."

"If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread." That is so powerful it regularly motivates grown men to act utterly foolishly - when someone says in effect, "If you're really a man, prove it." It's the same chilling dynamic that happens when we rise up and demand, in effect, "If we're the most powerful nation in the world, surely we can do something - anything - about terrorism."

The "something" in this test of Jesus, by the way, was a good idea. That makes the matter even more difficult. Why not feed people? Why not use divine power to meet the urgent and fundamental needs of his people?

We must be careful with this one, and remember that the issue is integrity and a sense of self, and not hunger and compassion. Too frequently followers of Jesus have grossly misused his response to this test, "Human beings do not live by bread alone" to rationalize not providing bread for people who have none. World hunger is an intolerable

scandal for people who would follow Jesus. He once said that to ignore a hungry brother or sister was to ignore him. His statement about the inadequacy of bread alone is a reminder to the not-hungry, to those of us who have more than enough, that there is more to it than bread: that God's wonderful gift of life is vulgarized if its meaning is reduced to the accumulation of things; that the precious selfhood God gives each of us, and for which Jesus died, is trivialized when all it serves is its own amusement and entertainment. Jesus' reply to Satan means that materialism is spiritual prostitution, not for those struggling with their own poverty, but for those who will do anything to increase their assets.

The second test begins again with the dynamic of self doubt. "If you are the Son of God, prove it." Simply let people see who you are. We can appreciate the relevance and potential of that suggestion. It's the P.R. ploy. We have witnessed the emergence of fast food restaurants from obscurity to household familiarity. We know the power of a television video to turn our football team into international celebrities, and give our coach enough name recognition to sell credit cards. We know the power of marketing and that's all Satan was suggesting. "Let's just run it up the flag pole and see if it flies: leap off the temple pinnacle, blow your own horn, run a series of snappy commercials." And I've always imagined Jesus saying more to himself than to Satan, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." A good quotation from the law, by the way. It was a real test because it would have worked. He knew it. It does work. People would believe if he did something dramatic. But, if in the process of doing something dramatic, he had to change or compromise who he was, something precious and essential would be lost. If you have to market the Gospel like deoderant, something integral to the enterprise is irretrievably lost.

The third test was in many ways the sternest of all. From the hills where he had played as a boy Jesus could see for miles - the rolling Galilean countryside that was once the Kingdom of God's chosen people. It could be done. I think Jesus was human enough that his blood stirred with patriotism: that he was seriously attracted to the political zealotry of a Judas Iscariot. Judah was ready for revolution: the Messiah - with spear and warhorse was expected to rout the Romans and establish himself on the Throne of David.

It was a compelling dream. If one knows the truth, political struggle, political process, political power is the way to build it into the affairs of the world. The Church has has a hand at it. In the name of Jesus Christ we have been crowning emperors and kings for the better part of two thousand years. Along the way, there have been times when we had the power. The results were mixed.

The context for Christian action, Christian behavior in the world, is political. To say that religion and politics don't mix is to know nothing about either. They are related. They are about the same thing. But to combine them in one entity: to bring together in one structure, one office, King and Priest, is something Jesus refused to do. He considered and decided not to be the king the people wanted. In the history of political thought, then, there is no idea more radical, nor more beneficial than the

Jeffersonian notion of the separation of church and state. Not the separation of religion and politics, but the wall between the institutions of religion and the institutions of government.

Jesus in the wilderness decided on a strategy of love and persuasion. He did not infer that the political process was evil, or morally inferior. That is a particularly wrong and destructive conclusion. In fact, Christian faith at its best respects and honors the political process as the place where justice and equality and full life for all are established. What Jesus rejected here was political power as a method of advancing his cause. It would proceed on love, not coercion. He would not and did not compromise that, but his people have, time and time again, tragically - by making war and conquering in his name, and enforcing the Gospel at sword point, or by continuing to try to enforce a Christian ethos by way of the law of the land.

Jesus emerged from the wilderness sure of who he was, his self, his integrity intact. He emerged from that time of testing a free man, having made some basic decisions about who he would be.

There is, I would suggest, a word to the church here. It is a word about not selling out to the success/failure criteria of our culture. There is almost relentless pressure today on people who love the church and are responsbile for the life of the church to do something, anything, about our numerical decline. The churches in our country that are known as "mainline" are in trouble. All are declining, in proportionate numbers and in real numbers. We Presbyterians now cheer whenever the rate of decline slows a bit. We have not gained members in years, and someone has put all that on a computer and calculated the date on whch the last American Presbyterian will die. Those are sobering facts and we must take them seriously. But we must always take even more seriously the unyielding integrity of our Lord and the fact that we are called - you and I as individual Christians, and you and I together as his church - we are called - not to be successful, but to be faithful. There may be times when we can be both. But we are not called to build bigger and bigger empires; we are called to faithful discipleship, to greater love for the world and greater service to its people. The word to the church here is every bit as difficult as those tests were to Jesus. It is a reminder that we are playing by different rules: that whatever our problems as a national church are, we will not solve them by becoming less than what God calls his people to be. It is a word to the church to remember that its success model is one who gave his life away loving; that the Lord it follows, got himself crucified.

There is a word here for us, individually. For most of us the wilderness is not very dramatic. It is simply that place, that time, where we must know who we are and be true to it. My experience is that we find ourselves in those places, those times, usually without much warning. My experience is that the tests come, often in very reasonable language, sometimes in the vocabulary of religion. The wilderness is the time when we have to reach deep inside and find values by which we are willing to live, instead of simply doing what is easy and acceptable and convenient.

We ask young people to live in that wilderness most of the time: for more than most of us had to. They have to make value decisions, based on their sense of their own identity, every day, every hour. And you and I, who have made it through what the language of the old Baptism service used to call the "perils of childhood and temptations of youth" ought to be praying for them and cheering them on and supporting them in every way we can.

Living life as honest and authentic persons is not often a simple matter of clear moral choices. Just as the tests of Jesus were not clear alternatives between good and evil, so the life you and I live is often morally ambigious and demands honest strugglinge and some risk taking. As we do that, our model is one who has been there ahead of us. From him we can learn that "ends" are not more important than "means"; that the goals, dreams and noble causes we espouse are never more important than the means we employ to achieve them. From our Lord we can learn that the sternest test in life is to our personal integrity and sense of self. From his time in the wilderness we can learn that that self, is the most precious possession we have: in fact, it is the only possession we truly have.

"This above all, to thine own self be true..."

There is an unforgetable moment in Robert Bolt's A Man for All Seasons, when Thomas More's son-in-law is urging him to compromise his convictions about the King's marriage, in order to save himself. More says something like: "The self is like water, cupped in your hand. If you open your fingers, even a tiny bit, it disappears."

In the wilderness Jesus decided to be who he had to be. He struggled with ambiguity: for days and nights he weighed, measured, and eliminated strategies which would compromise his integrity.

In the end he made a decision to commit his life to its purpose: to give it away loving, to rely on nothing but the power of God's love.

In the wilderness he made the decision that would result in the cross and in love's victory over all the powers of this world, and in our salvation.

Lent is a time for introspection. It is an invitation to regard an integrity so profound it chose to die rather than compromise. It is an invitation to regard a Lord who went into the wilderness for you: who, when you are in the moral wilderness of modern life, is there with you. It is an invitation to know and to hold tightly to that most precious part of our being - our integrity. And when the struggle is hard and our arms are weary, and our grip loosens, it is an invitation to grasp the strong hand of him who has been there for us and is there with us: even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Great God, give us strength to keep faith with ourselves: give us hearts strong for the struggle. And when we falter, help us to remember Jesus our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.